

## **Main Street N.J. Pitches to Somerville**

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SOMERVILLE -- A state program to improve downtowns would require hard work and provide no cash handout, but it could offer free professional services to liven up individual stores and the borough as a whole, an official with Main Street New Jersey told local stakeholders Wednesday.

Business owners, residents and municipal officials gathered on the second floor of Alfonso's Family Trattoria on West Main Street for a presentation from Jef Buehler, state coordinator for the program active in about two dozen communities statewide.

"We're a 'teach you how to fish' program, not a 'fish for you' program," Buehler said in one repeated theme.

The borough presently has the Somerville District Management Corporation overseeing downtown improvements.

Created in 1988, the corporation runs on a property tax surcharge paid by landowners in the special improvement district. The surcharge amounted to about \$400,000 in the district's 2007 operating budget.

Buehler stressed that Main Street New Jersey was not a grant program but provided technical assistance on downtown issues such as marketing, exterior and interior design standards and historic preservation as well other types of help for individual businesses.

That could mean helping shops choose appropriate facades and signs and generally encouraging better practices.

"It's not some cookie-cutter thing where the state says, 'OK, you need to be X,' " Buehler said.

The services themselves are free, Buehler said.

"You guys provide the local effort, and we'll match you with the state," Buehler said.